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❀ 12 ❀

VAN 1915

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The events that unfolded at Van in 1915 may be viewed as dramatic episodes in which the Armenian inhabitants were pitted against the Turkish authorities and Kurdish tribes at a time when Russian and Turkish armies faced each other in the Caucasus, in the eastern Ottoman provinces, and in Persia. The swift ripple effect of the war that erupted in Europe would give rise to a tidal wave of shattering interethnic strife in this area where diverse communities—Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Nestorians, Chaldeans, Jews, Yezidis, Gypsies—had coexisted for centuries.

The interpretation of these events constitutes an essential element of the historiography of the Armenian Genocide and for decades has been the object of a deaf dialogue between Turkish and Armenian writers. In 1917, when the final outcome of the war was still uncertain, an important Turkish publication[1] was issued in response to the British *Blue Book*[2] released the previous year under the direction of Viscount James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee.

Until the present, almost all the works of Turkish historians deny the genocide and thus the premeditation of the Young Turk government to eliminate the Armenians. In order to explain the decision to deport the Armenian population in the spring of 1915, they level the grave charge of treason. They are unanimous in treating the uprising of the

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[1] *Aspirations et agissements révolutionnaires des comités arméniens avant et après la proclamation de la Constitution* (Constantinople, 1917). Although the volume is in French, many documents are in Armenian.

[2] Great Britain, Parliament, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce,* Miscellaneous no. 31, 1916, ed. Arnold J. Toynbee (London: Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, 1916). There is no doubt that this important collection of documents on the Armenian massacres was intended as counter-propaganda to expose the Turkish and German theses, but the facts and reports therein have been confirmed by diverse sources.

Armenians of Van as a "revolt" or an "insurrection" in collusion with the Russian enemy during this critical period of offensive operations by the Entente Powers (Russia, France, and England) in Anatolia and at the Dardanelles (Gallipoli).[3]

Armenian witnesses and historians, on the other hand, emphasize that the Armenians of Van were subjected to a series of political provocations organized by the Turkish authorities beginning in February 1915 and were constrained to take measures for self-defense. According to an expression that appeared very early, *Vani herosamarte* (the Heroic Struggle of Van),[4] and later taken up by Soviet historians of the post-Stalinist era,[5] the uprising enabled the Armenians of Van to escape the tragic fate (deportations and massacres) of their compatriots in the neighboring *vilayets* (Erzerum, Bitlis, Diarbekir, Kharpert). A memorial monument, "The Eagle of Vaspurakan," was even erected not far from Erevan in 1981, dedicated to the victims of "The Heroic Struggle of Van," concrete evidence of the rise of an anti-Turkish sentiment tolerated in Soviet Armenia by the "Center" under Brezhnev.

The Van uprising began on April 7/20, 1915. The first date is according to the Julian calendar then in use in the Ottoman Empire and thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar used in the West. This discrepancy has often been a source of errors in dating and chronology. On April 11/24, 1915, when the battle of Gallipoli had begun, the Ottoman authorities arrested and deported several hundred Armenian lay and clerical leaders and intellectuals. This was the onset of the

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[3] See, for example, Kâmuran Gürün, *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). This volume of propaganda has the advantage of including an accessible bibliography and some archival files concerning Van. The same interpretation can be found in the works of certain Western authors, such as Stanford Shaw and Ezel K. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and Xavier de Planhol, *Minorités en Islam: Géographie politique et sociale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).

[4] This expression was first used in a proclamation by the Military Committee on April 10/23, 1915. See *Défense héroïque de Van (Arménie)* (Geneva: Droshak, 1916), p. 73. The booklet was published by the official organ of the Western Bureau of the Dashnaktsutiun.

[5] A.S. Hambaryan, "Vani 1915 tvakani herosamarte" [The Heroic Struggle of Van in 1915], *Patma-banasirakan handes,* no. 2 (1985), pp. 33-46; Makich Arzumanyan, *Hayastan 1914-1917* [Armenia 1914-1917] (Erevan: Hayastan, 1969); "Vani Herosamarte" [The Heroic Struggle of Van], illustrated article in *Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran* [Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia], vol. 11 (Erevan, 1985), pp. 272-74. There are several additional entries that supplement this article.

massive deportations and massacres of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire.[6] Is it reasonable to believe that an operation of such great magnitude, involving the displacement of more than one million people (even if one accepts the assertions that only deportations were intended and that the Armenian population of the empire was far less than given in European and Armenian sources), could be improvised in four days because of an uprising in a small Anatolian city, an action that no one could anticipate would last long or be successful?

The Young Turk revolution of July 1908 and restoration of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 had raised in Van great expectations from Constantinople. The partisans (*fedayis*) of the party Dashnaktsutiun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation; ARF) laid down their weapons and emerged in broad daylight as allies of the Young Turks. Adherents of Ottomanism, they preached membership in a common fatherland (*vatan*) of equal citizens without distinction of race or religion. But the Cilician massacres starting in Adana (March-April 1909) created a climate of mutual mistrust between Turks and Armenians. The loss of the Ottoman possessions in Africa and the Balkans, following three wars and three defeats, exacerbated the nationalism of the Young Turks, who supplanted the amorphous concept of Ottomanism with the nationalist ideology of Turkism. In the eastern (Armenian) vilayets, where administrative centralization did not eliminate insecurity, violence, or agrarian problems that set the Armenian *rayas* (peasants) against the Kurdish tribes and the Turkish *aghas* (landed aristocracy), the subject nationalities aspired to the rule of law.

During the First Balkan War (1912), the Russian government, active once again in Near Eastern affairs, resuscitated the Armenian Question. Supported by France and England, it succeeded against German and Austrian resistance and Turkish opposition in securing a compromise agreement of the European Powers on the final Armenian reform project, which was imposed on the Young Turk government on January 26/February 8, 1914. Instead of the six eastern vilayets and Trebizond as a single administrative region, two provinces were created in the compromise: one included the vilayets of Erzerum, Trebizond, and Sivas, and the other the vilayets of Van, Kharpert, Bitlis, and Diarbekir. The two super-provinces were placed under the direction of

[6] The deportation of Armenians had begun in Cilicia as early as February 1915. This study is based largely on the accounts, memoirs, and primary materials of contemporaries to the events in Van. The Armenian place names of the time have been retained here.

European inspectors-general, who were charged with implementation and supervision of the administrative, legal, and agrarian reforms. The appointment of the inspectors, the Dutch Louis Westenenk headquartered at Erzerum and the Norwegian Nicolai Hoff at Van, was agreed upon in April 1914. When the war erupted in Europe, Westenenk was in Constantinople en route to Erzerum, and Hoff had just arrived at Van. While the *vali* (governor) Tashin Bey, an influential member of the Committee of Union and Progress (Young Turks), extended an icy welcome and consternation reigned among the Muslim civil servants, the Armenian population of Van displayed undisguised enthusiasm.[7] During the reception in Hoff's honor at the Armenian Prelacy, the ARF leader Ishkhan told him: "You are the Messiah for whom we have been waiting for five or six years."[8] The recall of Hoff to Constantinople by the Turkish government on August 3/16, 1914, the day when a general mobilization was ordered, was the first stage in the rapid escalation of mistrust between Turks and Armenians of Van, reaching a climax in the spring of 1915.

The unilateral abrogation in September 1914 of the Capitulations or concessions that had been granted to the European Powers by previous Ottoman governments was hailed by Turkish nationalists. At about the same time the Eighth General Congress of the Dashnaktsutiun quickly adjourned. The twenty-seven delegates, some of whom had come from the United States, had been meeting in a theater in Erzerum with authorization from Minister of Interior Talaat. The general mobilization order caught the delegates by surprise, and they dispersed after electing a representative committee of three members: deputy in the Ottoman Parliament from Van, Arshak Vramian, Rostom (Stepan Zorian), and E. Aknouni.[9] The committee was contacted by a delegation

[7] For the atmosphere prevailing in Van in 1913-14, see Matteos Eplighatian, *Kiank me azgis kiankin mej* [A Life within the Life of My Nation) (Antelias, Lebanon: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1987), pp. 113-41. President of the Correctional Court of Van, Eplighatian (Eblighatian) was selected to serve as the Armenian interpreter for Inspector-General Hoff and had to accompany Hoff on his return trip to Constantinople.

[8] Ishkhan (Nikoghayos Poghosi Mikayelian, 1883-1915), a native of Karabagh, schoolmate of Aram Manukian in Shushi and Erevan, and an ARF militant from a very young age, had come to Van in 1904 where he served as teacher, propagandist, and party organizer. Ishkhan was founder in Van of the Dashnaktsutiun's (socialist) journal *Ashkhatank* [Labor] and of a reading room, "Light of Freedom."

[9] Vramian (Onnik Derdzakian, 1871-1915) was born in Constantinople, studied at Gevorgian Jemaran (seminary) in Echmiadzin, joined the Dashnaktsutiun in 1894 and became a central committee member in 1895, propagandist in Bulgaria and Romania in 1897, and member

of Ittihadists (Young Turks) led by Doctor Behaeddin Shakir, Omer Naji, and Hilmi Bey. The first of these was the pivot of the secret Teshkilâti Mahsusa (Special Organization) created at the beginning of August by Minister of War Enver Pasha for the purpose of organizing subversive activities beyond the Russo-Turkish border in the likely event of war with the Russian Empire.[10] The Young Turk deputation proposed that the ARF foment an uprising of the Armenians in the Russian Empire, as had already been agreed upon by certain Georgian and Muslim (Azerbaijani) representatives regarding their own people living in the Caucasus. In exchange for this collaboration, after the victory against Russia, Turkey would help create an "autonomous Armenia" in the Caucasus, to which would even be added some districts from the Ottoman vilayets of Van, Bitlis, and Erzerum. The three Armenian spokesmen deflected these proposals by responding that their party, like all Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, urged the government to pursue a policy of neutrality in the imperialist conflict but added that if war did come the Ottoman Armenians would fulfill their military obligations, just as they had in the previous crises.[11]

After the battleships *Goeben* and *Breslau* had violated the Straits Agreement (according to which no armed vessels were to pass through that waterway when the Ottoman Empire was not at war) and in October 1914 bombarded Russian military installations on the Black Sea, Turkey entered the great war on the side of Germany and Austria-

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of the party's Western Bureau and editor of its central organ, *Droshak* [Banner]. From 1899 to 1907, he was a party field worker in the United States, where in Boston he inaugurated the daily newspaper *Hayrenik* [Fatherland]. In 1907 Vramian was in the Caucasus, and, following the Young Turk revolution in 1908, in Constantinople and then in Van, where he was elected to the Ottoman Parliament in 1912. A brilliant journalist, he was also a contributor to Dashnaktsutiun's newspaper in Constantinople, *Azatamart* [Struggle for Freedom].

Rostom (Stepan Zorian, 1867-1919) was one of the founders of the Dashnaktsutiun in 1890 and served in various responsible positions, including membership in the party's Western Bureau.

Aknouni (Khachatur Malumian, 1863-1915) was born in the Caucasus, joined the Dashnaktsutiun in 1898, created the Association of the Armenian Students of Europe in 1902, and served as editor of *Droshak*. A series of his articles was published in book form as *Plaïes du Caucase* in 1905.

[10] Erik J. Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the C.U.P. in the Turkish National Movement, 1905-1926* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), pp. 83-84.

[11] Simon Vratsian, *Hayastani Hanrapetutiun* [Republic of Armenia], 2d ed. (Beirut: Mshak, 1958), pp. 6-10; Johannes Lepsius, *Rapport secret sur les massacres d'Arménie* (Beirut: Hamazkayine, 1968 [first published Paris: Payot, 1918]), pp. 216-21.

Hungary. This move divided the Armenian homelands between the two camps (Triple Alliance and Triple Entente) and transformed the Armenian Plateau into a war zone between the Russian and Ottoman empires. A *fetwa* of the Sheikh-ul-Islam summoned Muslims to a *jihad* or holy war against the infidels.[12] Intended to stir up the Muslim populations of the Russian, French, and British empires, the call had little effect beyond the Turkish borders, but within the Ottoman Empire it intensified the climate of hostility toward the Christian elements.[13] The creation of Armenian volunteer regiments in the Caucasus for use as scouts and auxiliaries in the Russian army, encouraged by the tsarist government and Catholicos Gevorg V in Echmiadzin, was an undertaking pregnant with repercussions. It was with some hesitation that the Armenian National Bureau in Tiflis agreed to organize the units.[14]

In the summer of 1914, the Armenians of Turkey, who since 1908 had been given the same rights and obligations as other citizens of the empire, were inducted into the Ottoman army. The unreliability of statistics does not allow for a determination of the exact number of Armenians mobilized. In Van, as elsewhere, some young Armenians were among those who evaded mobilization. The reaction of the Turkish authorities, who at the beginning of August marched on the Armenian district of Aygestan (Orchard or Gardens) and rounded up all men encountered in the streets, alarmed Aram, the most influential Dashnaktsakan (ARF) leader.[15] Realizing the gravity of the situation, he succeeded in assembling 300 young people, himself leading them to the vali's palace to the great dissatisfaction of the Armenian inhabitants, already affected by repeated requisitions of food, clothing, and

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[12] Maurice Larcher, *La Turquie dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Etienne Chiron et Berger-Levrault, 1925), pp. 45-48.

[13] This aspect was underscored in the report addressed by the deputy of Van, Vramian, to Minister of Interior Talaat on February 14, 1915. See Onnik Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte* [The Heroic Struggle of Van] (Sofia: P. Palegchian [Balekjian], 1930), pp. 26-34.

[14] Vratsian, *Hayastani Hanrapetutiun,* pp. 581-84.

[15] Aram Manukian (Sergei Hovhannisian, 1879-1919) was born in Karabagh into the family of a poor craftsman, attended primary and secondary schools in Shushi and Erevan, served as a Dashnaktsakan organizer among the Armenian working class in Baku in 1902, directed the Armenian resistance in Kars against the Russian authorities in 1903, and was assigned to Van in 1904. Between 1912 and 1914, Aram was the most active Dashnaktsakan leader in Vaspurakan, developing schools, youth movements, village organizations, and the press. In 1915, he headed the self-defense of Van and became its short-lived governor. Aram was one of the founders of the Republic of Armenia (May 28, 1918), serving as minister of interior, at which post he died of typhus in January 1919.

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The ill-fated offensive of the Turkish Third Army, launched in full winter into the Caucasus by Enver Pasha, ended in a military catastrophe. The Ottoman army, in spite of the heroism and capacity for endurance of the Turkish soldier, was cut to pieces during the battle of Sarikamish in January 1915.[16] The survivors scattered, decimated by typhus, dysentery, and freezing cold. The retreat of the Ottoman troops, mixed with Muslim refugees, was accompanied by requisitions, looting, and massacres in Armenian and Nestorian villages by Kurdish and Turkish irregular bands. Desertions, traditionally high in the Ottoman army, multiplied, including also some Armenians. The pursuit of these men gave rise to new violence. At the same time, Armenian soldiers were disarmed and assigned to labor battalions. This dangerous accumulation of misunderstandings, protests, confrontations, and conflicting interests was analyzed in a report of Vramian to Talaat on February 14, 1915. The only outcome, however, was the replacement of the relatively benign vali, Hasan Tahsin Bey, by Jevdet Bey, whom the Armenians had labeled "Nalband Bey" (the blacksmith) because of his extremely cruel acts of repression in Bashkale, where he had nailed horseshoes on his victims.

After Turkey's entry into the war, significant troop movements took place in the eastern provinces, and beginning in November 1914 Van vilayet was the scene of a number of incidents (*depk,* in Armenian). In the *kaza* or district of Van and the high valleys and towns with a large Armenian population (Shatakh, Hayots Dzor, Adiljevaz, Arjesh, Timar, Gevash, Karjkan) and in isolated Armenian villages (Belu, Atanants, Ulm, Aren, Aliur, Kem.), the extortions, search for deserters, and slashing of telegraph lines degenerated into clashes between soldiers, gendarmes, and *cheté* bands, on the one side, and Armenian self-defense groups, on the other side.

A degree of calm returned in February 1915, thanks to the intervention of two "peace delegations." The first, made up of the two deputies of Van in the Ottoman Parliament, the Turk Munib Effendi and the Armenian Vramian, went to Belu, located in the mountains to the south of the Lake Van. The second, which included the Turk Vafik Bey and the Armenian Ishkhan, appeared in the kaza of Timar, where the Otto-

[16] W.E.D. Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border, 1828-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 282-85.

man army was actively searching for deserters and Armenian youth accused of having taken arms against the Kurds.[17] Vramian, fearful of the real threat of civil war, upon his return to Van addressed a long telegram to Governor Jevdet Bey, who was then near the Persian frontier.[18] Noting that he had already presented to Minister of Interior Talaat proposals to solve the most urgent problems (desertion and violence by gendarmes and armed Kurdish militia), Vramian requested reparations for the damages sustained by the Armenian peasants. He assured the government that it would have nothing to fear from the Armenians if it took measures to secure their life and property. In a menacing reply, Jevdet Bey sarcastically expressed astonishment at Vramian's assessment.

On March 17/30, 1915, Governor Jevdet, accompanied by 600 Circassian horsemen, made a triumphant entry into Van. As required by tradition, he was welcomed outside the city walls by a delegation including Ottoman civil servants and the Armenian locum tenens, Eznik vardapet Nerkararian, Armenian merchants, and Vramian and Ishkhan. While his pleasant and measured remarks were welcomed by the Armenian leaders, within a few days Jevdet had concentrated 2,000 soldiers around Van, and these were soon joined by several thousand mounted men and Kurdish irregulars.[19] On March 16/29, in Shatakh, a large, important village south of Van, the arrest of Hovsep Choloyan, teacher and local Dashnaktsakan leader, together with five young Armenians, was indicative of the increased distrust of the Turkish authorities. Indeed, up to then, the authorities had used the ARF committees as a means to communicate their orders (mobilization, requisitions, war contributions) to the Armenian population. Emotions were so intense in Shatakh that young people took to the woods and the Armenian population of the outlying neighborhoods sought refuge in Tagh (the most important Armenian quarter), where barricades went up.[20] As soon as the news became known in Van, Jevdet Bey summoned the Armenian leaders and told them that all Armenian men from eighteen

[17] A-Do (Hovhannes Ter-Martirosian), *Mets depkere Vaspurakanum 1914-1915 tvakannerin* [The Great Incidents in Vaspurakan in 1914-1915] (Erevan: Loys, 1917), p. 145. This lengthy work is the result of an investigation conducted by the author in Van in 1915.

[18] At the time of his appointment as governor of Van, Jevdet Bey was commanding a Turkish expeditionary force that had pressed into Persian Azerbaijan after the tactical Russian withdrawal from that region.

[19] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte,* pp. 34, 38.

[20] See A-Do's *Mets depkere.*

to forty-five years of age were to be mobilized as *amele*s (road laborers) and assigned to earthworks in the frontier areas.[21] Interspersed with insults toward the French and Russians, the governor gave notice that deserters would be subject to the death penalty and their families deported to Iraq or Syria.[22] The requests of the Armenian National Council to allow the Vanetsis (Armenians of Van) to join the regular army or to purchase military exemptions by paying the *bedel* of 43 liras failed.[23] Finally, after heated discussions, the council decided "to deliver" immediately 500 conscripts.

The next day, April 2/15, a meeting of the ARF on the premises of the party's newspaper *Ashkhatank* (Labor) was even more stormy. Vramian, in the presence of Aram and Ishkhan who were silent, held his position against the militants, who were wary about the fate that would await the Armenian conscripts and who denounced the "Armenocidal" policies of the Turkish government. Perhaps prophesying his own approaching death, Vramian declared that it was necessary to be prepared to forfeit the 500, possibly even more, ameles and even accept "the destruction of the whole province by iron and fire" if these sacrifices would spare the majority of Armenians.[24] This position was supported by Eznik vardapet, who issued a call to the Van Armenians to perform all their civic duties.[25]

On April 3/16, at the request of Jevdet Bey, Ishkhan, accompanied by three Armenian fedayis and four Turkish police officers, departed as a mediator to Shatakh in an effort to restore calm and reason. But on the night of April 3-4, in the mixed Kurdish-Armenian village of Hirj, Ishkhan and his three Armenian bodyguards were taken by surprise and murdered by a company of Circassians sent by Jevdet Bey.[26]

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[21] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte*, p. 35.

[22] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 154.

[23] The National Council was composed of fourteen clerical and lay members, who assisted the prelate of Van in the administration of the community. At the beginning of the war, it became a more representative body by adding to its ranks two representatives each of the Dashnaktsutiun (Vramian and Ishkhan), Social Democrat Hnchakian Party (Hrand Galikian and Cherbashian) and the constitutional democrat Sahmanadir Ramkavar Party (Kuyumjian and Hovhannesian), together with a representative of the merchants (Terzibashian).

[24] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte*, p. 37.

[25] Eznik's exhortation on April 2/15, 1915 was clearly in response to the escalating crisis and was predicated on assurances given that the government had undertaken steps "to protect the life, the honor, and the families" of the conscripts.

[26] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 156, and Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte*, pp. 42-43, give an account of this trap and emphasize the deception of the vali and the treachery of the

At dawn, forty-six villagers, all the Armenian males of Hirj, were gathered in a stable and savagely slaughtered amid the shrieks of the women and children. All fifty corpses were thrown into a well, from where the Russians would exhume them a month later.[27]

At dawn, on the same day, April 4/17, Vramian and Aram, who were still unaware of the Hirj massacre, were each summoned separately by telephone to the residence of Jevdet Bey.[28] Vramian complied but first succeeded in alerting his comrade, who managed to go into hiding. In spite of his vehement protests and his parliamentary immunity, Vramian was arrested forthwith. Dispatched to Constantinople on orders of Talaat Pasha, he disappeared without leaving a trace even before getting as far as Bitlis.[29]

The bloodshed at Hirj was a prelude to a true "Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre."[30] Detachments of the Ottoman army with two or three field cannons undertook clean-up operations in the Armenian villages of Hayots Dzor, supported by gendarmes and Kurdish tribesmen attracted by the quarry. The army went up the valleys during daytime, stopped at nightfall, and then resumed operations at dawn. It was the beginning of spring when snow still covered the highlands. The Armenian peasants were taken by surprise in their homes, unable to flee to the mountains. Seeking to avoid confrontation, they tried to bribe the Kurds and soldiers with gifts of food, money, jewelry, and weapons. In fear of the worst, they desisted from offering any resistance, but without exception the men were arrested, tortured, and slaughtered or bound together and hurled over cliffs and into lakes. The corpses were profaned, emasculated, and dismembered. The women were raped and carried away with the children and the flocks. In the plundered villages, churches and houses were put to the torch.

Within a few days of the onset of the inferno on April 6/19, 51 villages of Hayots Dzor, Arjesh, and Berkri were wiped away, together with their entire Armenian population.[31] On occasion, the Armenians

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Kurdish friend who had extended Ishkhan his hospitality.

[27] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 166.

[28] The telephone connected the palace of the governor to various police stations in the City and in Aygestan.

[29] In response to the request of a deputation of Armenian spokesmen, an American missionary, and the Italian consul to release Vramian, Jevdet Bey stated that he was merely acting in accordance with instructions of the central government.

[30] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte*, p. 103.

[31] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 167.

preferred an "honorable death" or a "human death." In such instances, individual courage, a few rifles, a native knowledge of the terrain, clever use of the landscape and foliage for camouflage, and the presence of a small number of experienced partisans allowed the villagers to keep the army at bay. This was the case at Arjak,[32] whose inhabitants, besieged on April 5/18 on orders of the district governor (*kaimakam*) of Saray, succeeded in reaching Aygestan. To the south, a half dozen Armenian and Assyrian villages managed to fight their way to safety in the mountain of Varag (Varak). In the high valley of Hayots Dzor, the Armenians could only mount 80 rifles against the combined governmental force of soldiers, gendarmes, and Kurdish semi-regulars, supported by mountain cannons. Engaged in such unequal combat, the defenders decided to disperse: eight hundred succeeded in getting to the monastery of Varag; others hid in the forest before ascending toward the snow-covered peaks, where they were gripped by cold and hunger; still others tried to reach Van but were massacred en route.

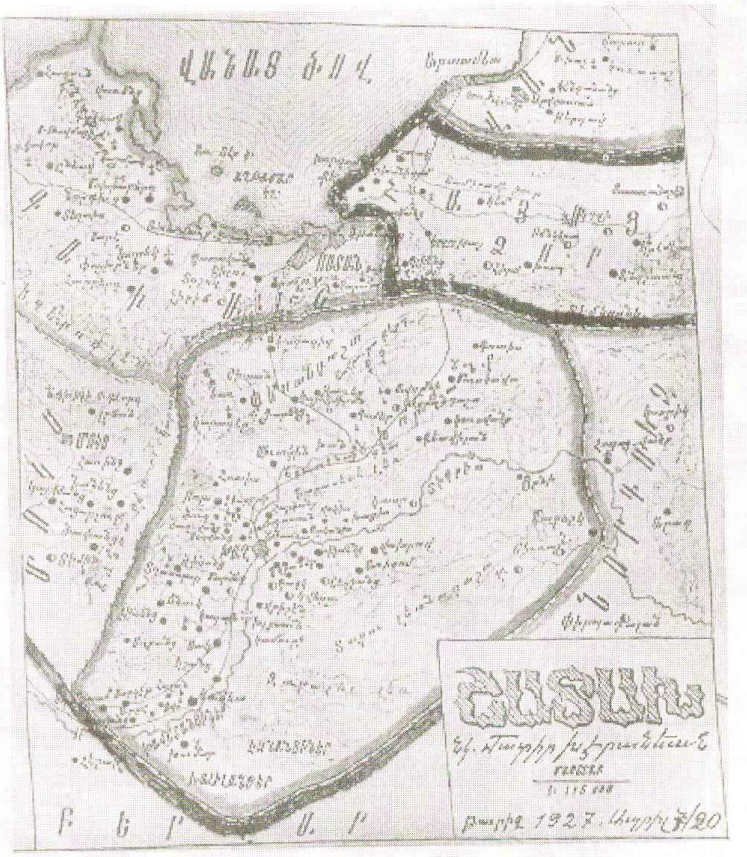
North of Van, on the peninsula of Timar, where there were about thirty Armenian and an equal number of Kurdo-Turkish villages, the kaimakam of Berkri (Bergri), Zia Bey, and the commander of gendarmerie, Amar Bey, began a systematic ethnic cleansing of the district on April 6/19; only four villages resisted. In Janik, where of the more than 700 Armenian inhabitants 73 men were killed immediately, the population, thrown into panic and swelled in number by refugees descending from the mountains, tried to take to the boats to flee to the small island of Lim. But the army had already established a cordon along the coast, blocking any way to escape. The same scenes of panic and horror occurred in Marmed, a village of 811 inhabitants, whose mayor (*res)* had prudently sent away the armed men and hoisted the Ottoman flag. He was executed in the village church, along with a hundred other Armenians. The gendarmes prevented the women and children from reaching the island of Ktuts, where the Armenians had found refuge during the massacres of 1896. A-Do, in his invaluable work, has recorded, day-by-day and village-by-village, the events that laid waste to Vaspurakan in April 1915. The Armenian resistance was particularly fierce around Varag. Located at a splendid site with very difficult access, the monastery of Varagavank, a religious center and

[32] Arjak was a village of 180 homes with 1,170 Armenians.

Jevdet Bey, Vali of Van

Ishkhan

Arshak Vramian



The Shatakh District

Tagh, Shatakh

place of pilgrimage, exerted a powerful attraction on the Armenians of Vaspurakan. Since the time of Khrimian Hayrik, Varag had become the cradle of the national movement and one of the symbols of the Armenian cultural rebirth. History and geography combined made Varag a natural refuge. Thousands of villagers, the majority of them women, children, and elderly persons, attained the monastery by transversal valleys and mountain paths. Varag, which controlled the two roads from Van to the Persian border, on the north by way of Arjak and on the south by way of Bashkale, was evacuated by the several dozen encamped Ottoman gendarmes on April 7/20, the day when the fighting started in the city.[33] Already encircled, the Armenians of Van were preoccupied with preserving direct contact with Varag monastery as an ultimate fallback position and, if necessary, route of exodus toward Persian Azerbaijan. The geo-strategic importance of Varagavank, whose buildings were hastily reinforced by the refugees, could not escape the attention of Jevdet Bey. After several futile attempts, a large contingent of cavalry, chetés, and Kurdish irregulars, supported by three cannons, overran the Armenian positions on April 25/May 8.[34] Varag was set ablaze and gutted. The Armenians scattered, some ascending toward the heights, and others, flanked by armed men, descending toward Van.

How should the positioning of the Ottoman troops in Van vilayet in April 1915 be interpreted? There is little doubt that the objective was to isolate the city from the outlying small towns and villages. Was this Jevdet Bey's personal initiative at a time when the Russian armies had crossed the eastern borders of the empire? Was this the implementation of a plan conceived in Constantinople to use the opportunity created by the world war to purge the area of its Armenian element? It is clear that Jevdet Bey returned from his failed campaign in Persia persuaded that the Armenians of Van were in collusion with the Armenian volunteer detachments in the Caucasus. The fragility of the political and social situation revived all the mistrust, all the anxieties, and all the hatreds. The rumor of the imminent appearance of the Russian army, guided by Armenian volunteers, caused panic and anger among the Muslim population but stirred both hope and fear among the Armenians, who witnessed the arming of the Kurdish

[33] The gendarmes left under Armenian pressure, but they had already murdered the two priests and the four servants in the convent.

[34] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 219ff.

tribes by the Ottoman authorities, reminiscent of the prelude to the general massacres of 1896. Fear, and fear alone, was the cause of the Van uprising.

The episodes of the battles, which lasted almost a month, from April 7/20 to May 3/16, 1915, become understandable only through the organization and plan of a city whose site and singularity have since antiquity struck travelers and geographers. Set on a rocky crag with vertical walls and located on the crossroads of several natural routes in a plain bordered in the west by the lake and surrounded by an amphitheater of mountains, Van consisted of two distinct entities: the City and Aygestan.[35] The City was girdled with a system of fortifications backed by the Rock and having four gates leading in different directions. The Orchard or Garden district of Aygestan, at a distance of 4 or 5 kilometers from the City, was a new agglomeration without walls. Some 20,000 Armenians and 17,000 Muslims (Turks, Kurds, Persians, Circassians), that is to say an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of Van lived in Aygestan. It was divided into Muslim quarters, located in the west and the northwest, and Armenian quarters, located in the east and the northeast. Each of the Armenian districts (Arark, Norashen, Hankoysner) had its church, school, and fresh-water spring. In the Arark quarter, on Ararents square, was the second market of Van. Along the avenue Nalband-oghlu, which led to Khach square, was a mixed zone, whose Armenian and Muslim populations would withdraw to their respective ethnic districts when the street became a sector of the front line. In addition, three barracks built during the Hamidian era (Toprakkale in the north, Hamud Agha in the center, and Haji Bekir in the south) made it possible for the authorities to keep the Armenian districts under surveillance. From the very start of the hostilities the road leading from the City to Aygestan was controlled by Muslims on the west and by Armenians on the east. The Armenian population of Haykavank, where no possibility of retreat existed, took refuge in the City. The topography as well as the spatial distribution of the communities explain why the Muslim district of Shamiram always remained beyond the combat zone and why the Armenians of the City and Aygestan, separated from each other, carried out two parallel but separate struggles.

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[35] See chapter 10 in this volume, "The City of Van at the Turn of the Twentieth Century."

The Struggle in Aygestan

In contrast with the turmoil of the preceding days, calm returned to Van on April 4/17, 1915. While an Armenian commission acted to draw up the list of the 500 ameles promised to the vali, the workshops, businesses, and schools functioned normally.[36] But the events of Shatakh, the murder of Ishkhan, the arrest of Vramian, and the military operations in Hayots Dzor produced a catastrophic sequence. The refusal of Jevdet Bey to release Vramian and the troop movements, which as of April 5 isolated the two Armenian sectors of Van, convinced Aram that there existed no alternative to self-defense. This was not a new experience for the Armenians of Van. As the common strategy of the three Armenian revolutionary parties (Armenakan, Hnchakian, and Dashnaktsutiun), it had already been tested in June of 1896.[37] Moreover, the "Armenian-Tatar" war of 1905-07, which had pitted Armenians and Muslims (Azerbaijanis) against each other in many places in the Caucasus between Baku and Tiflis, had a stirring effect on the Armenians of Van, Mush, Erzerum, and even Tabriz.[38] The experience also seemed to demonstrate that resistance was a better gamble than submission. Finally, for the Westernized Armenian intelligentsia of Van, self-defense had become a matter of national dignity and political ethics, despite the risks of governmental reprisals.

Sunday, April 5/18, was a decisive day. Armenians and Muslims started to evacuate the mixed districts, and a number of Armenian families sought refuge in the German and American missionary compounds.[39] A new delegation of the Armenian National Council, accompanied by an American missionary, was confronted with Jevdet Bey's demand that all Armenian men from eighteen to forty-five years of age appear before him. This was the moment of final rupture. The three Armenian parties, declaring "that the Turkish government has

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[36] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte,* p. 40.

[37] The turmoil of 1896 came to be regarded as a "dress rehearsal" for the events of April 1915. See Artak Darbinian, *Hay azatagrakan sharzhman oreren: Husher, 1890-1940* [From the Days of the Armenian Liberation Movement: Memoirs, 1890-1940] (Paris: Hay Azgayin Himnadram, 1947), p. 64.

[38] Anahide Ter Minassian, "Particularities of the Revolution of 1905 in Transcaucasia," in François-Xavier Coquin and Celine Gervais-Francelle, eds., *1905: La première Révolution russe* (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 1986), pp. 315-35.

[39] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte,* p. 49.

decided to destroy the Armenians of Van," decided to resist.[40] They organized the Military Committee of Armenian Self-Defense of Van, also known as the National Committee of Self-Defense.[41] Most members of the committee were chosen for their military experience and past role as fedayis: Bulgaratsi Grigor and Kaitsak Arakel (Dashnaktsakans), Armenak Ekarian (Armenakan, now Ramkavar), and the talented artist Panos Terlemezian (a veteran Armenakan).[42] The Military Commitee was headed by Ekarian and supported by the Office of Information and Office of Arms Distribution. The members of the Information Office, Hmayak Manukian (editor of *Ashkhatank*), Onnik Mkhitarian, and Armenak Pogharian (all Dashnaktsakans) also served as secretaries of the Military Committee. Assisting them were Ramkavar Vardan Papikian (Vartan Babigian), secretary of a commercial firm, Armenakan-Ramkavar teacher Karapet (Garabed) Ajem-Khachoyan, Hnchakian lawyer Hrand Galikian (Hrant Kaligian), and Dashnaktsakan teacher Arpiar Safrastian.[43] Members of the Arms Distribution Office were the goldsmith Davit Papazian, merchant Vahram Ter-Poghosian (Der Boghosian), craftsman Karapet Beylarian, and goldsmith Vahram Shiroyan, all Dashnaktsakans, and the craftsman Gabriel Semerjian, a Ramkavar. But the heart and soul of the self-defense of Van was Aram Manukian, who after the loss of Vramian and Ishkhan asserted himself not only as an ARF party leader but also as a national leader. This roster of names, professions, and political memberships shows clearly that though the union of the Armenian parties at Van was real, the reigns of defense efforts in 1915 were held in the hands of the intelligentsia, the middle class, and the Dashnaktsutiun.

Before April 10/23, three other organizations appeared: the Red Cross, the Provisions Commission, and the Supply Committee. The Armenian Red Cross of Self-Defense came into existence during the battle. Six persons, having under their direction some thirty pupils, both boys and girls from the upper classes of the Armenian schools, opened four medical stations that were transformed into hospitals. The

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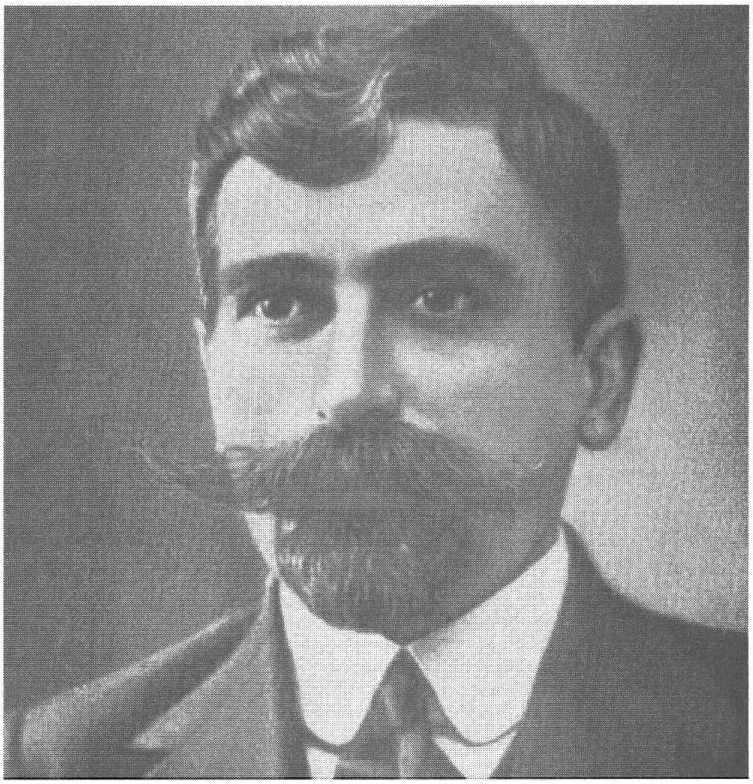
[40] Ibid., p. 53.

[41] This body is referred to hereafter as the Military Committee.

[42] See *Husher Armenak Ekariani* [Memoirs of Armenak Ekarian], ed. L. Ajemian (Cairo: Nor Astgh, 1947; reprinted, Beirut: Zartonk, 1985). The Ramkavar Party was founded in the autumn of 1908 with the adherence of the Armenakans and some dissident Hnchakians.

[43] In 1916 Papikian began to publish a new series of the journal *Van-Tosp* in Tiflis as the voice of the refugees of Van in the Caucasus.



Aram Manukian

Armenak Ekarian

Provisions Commission (six members and six assistants) inventoried stocks and reserves and had the right to requisition goods and raw materials. The thirteen-member Supply Committee was concerned with subsistence, having to solve problems of resource sharing and providing nourishment to several thousand refugees, in addition to the inhabitants of Aygestan.[44] To these bodies were soon added the Women's Committee to oversee the preparation of clothing and bandages, the Justice Commission, and the Police Corps. A teacher organized from among his pupils a brass band, which paraded near the front lines, tirelessly playing military marches and patriotic songs to provide moral support to the Armenian combatants.[45] A Medical Council to fight against epidemics and a Municipal Council emerged in their turn.

Aygestan was thus organized as a true "Commune." The comparison is not exaggerated, for this was the actual term used by contemporaries. The Paris Communes of 1792 and 1871, about which *Ashkhatank* was writing already on March 7/20, 1915,[46] served as models for these learned Armenians nourished by French history and romantic literature. But the more recent and closer experiences of the Baku Soviet of 1905 and of the *anjuman* (council) of Tabriz in 1908 should not be overlooked.[47] The "Commune of Van" may be regarded as the self-governing municipal power of a population, besieged and gripped by an unbreakable fever for freedom and autonomy. Armenak Ekarian, as president of the Military Committee, addressed his compatriots to explain not their "right" to insurrection but their "duty" of insurrection. "It is not by our will that we shall fight. That was imposed on us. Two ways are open to us: either to bow our heads before the oppressor and submit to an ignominious death or else to come out dauntless and with open brow against him and to prefer the honorable path of our

[44] The Armenian sources have preserved the names of all committee members. In Van, as elsewhere in the region, each family, rural or urban, lived during winter and spring using reserves prepared in the summer. The problem of supply initially entailed feeding the refugees and the combatants, for whom each family was obliged to contribute. The committee quickly resorted to rationing, allowing 150 to 200 grams of bread a day per person.

[45] The band exasperated the governor, who saw therein a sign of Armenian insolence.

[46] The article, dated February 26, 1915, and signed as Asso from the prison of Van, presumably was written by a jailed militant.

[47] Armenians from the Caucasus played a significant role in the Iranian constitutional movement of 1906-12.

forefathers."[48] The same day, April 5/18, in a less dramatic declaration addressed to the "Warriors of Self-Defense," the Military Committee defined the defensive program, chain of command, and rules of discipline.[49]

These calls were heeded. Convinced "that the Turkish government has decided to destroy our race,"[50] the Armenian population, from all walks of life, without discrimination of sex or age, mobilized. According to a participant, this was "a people's war,"[51] even though this assessment made well after the events cloaks a complex reality where unanimity was not always the rule, where personal egos clashed, and where local particularism sometimes shaped political agendas.

What were the armed forces involved? The vali of Van is estimated to have had at his disposal 10,000 to 12,000 men, consisting of 6,000 infantrymen and 4,000 to 6,000 Kurdish tribesmen, chetés, and gendarmes. He also had twelve guns (light mountain artillery and short-range heavy fortress artillery), rifles and ammunition in unspecified quantity, the city arsenal, and the small flotilla on Lake Van. On the other hand, the meticulous statistics drawn up by the organizations revolving around the Military Committee make it possible to know exactly the strength of the Armenian forces.[52] Including the partisans who arrived with the refugees of Hayots Dzor, there were in Van 1,053 Armenian combatants.[53] This number was circumscribed by the quantity of available weapons in Aygestan: 506 rifles with 74,824 cartridges and 549 revolvers, including 300 six-shot Mausers, with 39,089 bullets.[54] The overwhelming majority of these fighters had no previous military experience, and some had never before held a weapon. The disparity between the opposing sides is obvious. Only determination, moral fiber, organization, and effective defensive strategy made it possible for the Armenians to resist the combined governmental forces.

It was also on April 5/18 that the Military Committee, in an appeal "to our Turkish compatriots," called for the solidarity of Van's Mus-

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[48] See *Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran,* vol. 11, pp. 272-73.

[49] The eleven-point regulations are given in Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte,* pp. 55-56.

[50] From the memoirs of Panos Terlemezian, as cited by Hambaryan, p. 33.

[51] Darbinian, *Hay azatagrakan sharzhman oreren,* p. 326.

[52] The statistics are published in the principal works used in this study.

[53] Thanks to memoirs, declarations, booklets, and other records, the names of most of the combatants have been preserved.

[54] These figures contradict the Turkish allegations of a veritable Armenian arsenal at Van.

lims and Armenians against the "alien" provocateurs of the central government and in opposition to the ruinous policies of the vali.[55] If this call remained unanswered, at least the Muslim inhabitants of Van did not take an active part in the bloodshed.[56]

Transmitted through the Military Committee, Aram's orders were very clear: mobilize the men, leave the weapons in their caches, control the strategic points, desist from any offensive initiative. Better than any account, the contemporary maps make it possible to visualize "the self-defense front" that surrounded the Armenian districts of Aygestan on the evening of April 5. Divided into seven sectors, each one under a local commander, the front included 79 Armenian positions.[57] The salient points of this defensive ring—the river Hankoysner, the military barracks, in particular Hamud Agha in the heart of the Armenian positions, the main streets, the crossroads (Khach, Arark), the tall buildings (churches, schools, hotel, former British consulate[58]), which were transformed into watchtowers and shooting positions, became the sites of confrontation.

The Military Committee issued its directives through dated and numbered official statements, often written in a grandiloquent style. Some of them were true ordinances showing that the committee regarded itself as the legitimate power. *Ashkhatank* continued to be published in a reduced format. Putting a silencer on socialist propaganda and emphasizing instead Armenian patriotism, the newspaper reported each day on "news from the front" and tried to raise morale. It was also for psychological effect that the Military Committee created on April 8/21 the silver "Cross of Honor" for exceptional bravery.[59]

The Armenian chroniclers who recorded each episode of the "Heroic Struggle of Van" are unanimous in dividing the period of combat into three phases: April 7/20-15/28, April 16/29-April 25/May 8, and April 26/May 9-May 5/18, 1915.

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[55] Mkhitarian, *Vani herosamarte*, p. 71.

[56] This information was affirmed by A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 243. The conflict at Van would pit the Armenians against the Ottoman authorities and their armed forces consisting of regular ranks recruited throughout the empire and local Kurdish irregulars and cheté bands.

[57] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 224ff.

[58] Occupied by Turkish gendarmes, the consulate building was set on fire by the Armenians on April 8/21.

[59] The inscription engraved on the cross, "Hay Hegh.," is an abbreviation for "Armenian Revolution" or "Armenian Revolutionary."

The First Period: April 7/20-April 15/28, 1915

An incident sparked the beginning of the battle on April 7/20. Armenians opened fire to avenge the death of two of their compatriots who had tried to prevent the rape of two Armenian women by Turkish sentinels. The governor immediately deployed troops previously consigned to the barracks and launched a thunderous cannon attack, throwing Aygestan into turmoil. Still, at nightfall, although walls and roofs had collapsed, the Armenians held steadfast, having stood the test of fire and even gained some advantages by occupying the telegraph office at Khach and surrounding the Hamud Agha barracks. They consolidated their positions by candlelight during the night. Thereafter, the population became accustomed to the sounds and smoke of the bombardments. In fact, the inaccurate and not very intense cannon fire did not claim many victims. A new commission was charged with recording all damage and having low barricades constructed in the streets and trenches dug between the Turkish and Armenian positions. On April 9/22, Bulgaratsi Grigor, assisted by Armenian *kankan*s (Van's underground irrigation channel diggers), succeeded in laying dynamite beneath the barracks, which burned for several hours.[60] A little girl, Sevo, after "having entrusted her Mauser to her brother so that it wouldn't fall into the hands of the enemy," slipped behind the barrack wall and confirmed that the Turks had withdrawn, for which she was awarded the Cross of Honor.

This episode gave occasion for the Military Committee to issue a reminder that it was necessary to spare weapons and conserve ammunition. Orders were given to fire only if it was certain that the bullet would strike its target.[61] The prolongation of the combat, foreseen neither by the governor nor by the insurgents, left the Armenians with a rapidly dwindling supply of food and ammunition, a crisis that became more acute with each passing day. But for the moment, the tone of the Military Committee was ebullient: "The numerical superiority of the enemy, the certainty of our approaching death do not frighten us. No! We want to enjoy the divine spirit of death. We want to give proof that in this world war of nations, the Armenian people, this ages-old walnut tree of the Orient, knows how to die, weapons in hand,

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[60] See the enthusiastic, detailed account in *Ashkhatank*, April 9(22), 1915.

[61] *Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran*, vol. 11, p. 273.

on the ruins of the enemy."[62]

Apparently surprised by the firmness of the Armenian resistance, Jevdet Bey, without relinquishing the use of force, resorted to a long established tactic. He channeled the flow of Armenian refugees from the nearby villages into Aygestan to vanquish the rebels through starvation. Faced with this new situation, the Supply Commission expanded its activities, carefully distributing the limited food supplies and fixing the price of grain. New agencies were created to deal with justice, law and order, and the implementation of ordinances prohibiting alcohol consumption, loitering in the streets, spreading false information, and looting abandoned houses. Orders were also issued to respect "decency" in the homes where several families had been forced to crowd together in close quarters.

The correspondence between the vali and his friend, the Italian consul Spordoni, who represented a state that was then still neutral, is revealing.[63] For Jevdet Bey, the Armenian insurgents were "traitors," who "act to support the operations of the enemy, because they are counting on the swift arrival of the Russians."[64] On his part, Spordoni availed himself to relay the views of the Military Committee to the vali: "If the Armenians have recourse to weapons, it is because they are convinced that the government, under the pretext of military service, wants to exterminate them completely. Without counting on the help of the Russians or without waiting for them, they are determined to defend the lives of their families."[65] Spordoni also transmitted the protest of the American and German missionaries, whose compounds had been shelled and struck by stray bullets and who were in fear of reprisals despite the fact that they had given haven to Muslims and Armenians alike.

At the end of this first period, the Military Committee, notwithstanding its confident official statements, considered the situation sufficiently serious to send messengers to the Russian authorities in the Caucasus with a pressing call for immediate assistance.[66]

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[62] *Ashkhatank*, April 10(23), 1915; A-Do, *Mets depkere*, pp. 259-60.

[63] Italy entered the war in May 1915.

[64] This correspondence extended from April 10/23 to May 3/16, 1915. Seized after the occupation of Van by the Russians, it was initially published in *Ashkhatank* and then in *Défense héroïque de Van*, p. 36.

[65] Ibid, p. 41.

[66] Mkrtich H. Nersisian, *Genotsid armian v Osmanskoi imperii* [Genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire] (Erevan: Hayastan, 1982), p. 281.

The Second Period: April 16/29-April 25/May 8

The second period was marked by intense combat, lasting day and night. The governor had received fresh troops with Krupp cannons, which he installed around Aygestan. He sought to achieve a decisive advantage. On their side, the Armenians had acquired some real experience, their brass band marching constantly in the streets playing *Mer Hayrenik* ("Our Fatherland," the anthem of the future Armenian republic), but they now pinned their hopes on the arrival of the Russian army and Armenian volunteer regiments from the Caucasus. Following the battle of Sarikamish, the Russians resumed the offensive and by March 1915 had reoccupied the valley of Alashkert, while on the Iranian-Turkish border, they drove back the Ottoman army that had advanced as far as Tabriz under the command of Enver Pasha's uncle, Halil Pasha.[67]

On April 20/May 3 the Ottoman troops, beaten in Persian Azerbaijan by the Russian 2nd Division and Armenian volunteers of Andranik,[68] retreated toward Van. At the same time, preceded by some 3,000 Armenian volunteers of the combined Araratian Legion,[69] the Russian Fourth Army Corps advanced on Van via Igdir and Berkri. The obsession of all Armenian organizations in the Caucasus was "to save beleaguered Van." After multiple Armenian entreaties, the Russian authorities allowed this Armenian avant-garde to hasten to the relief of Van.

While Jevdet Bey intensified the bombardment, the Armenians sought to develop their military potential in Aygestan. They built a small arms factory, a foundry for bullets, and a gunpowder plant in a laboratory directed by a chemistry teacher,[70] and they extended the network of trenches. Combatants or craftsmen, adult or teenage busy-bee workers, all have been immortalized in a series of photographs that have been preserved to become a part of the historical record.

It was Bulgaratsi Grigor who came up with the idea of smelting

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[67] For these military operations in the Caucasus and Persian Azerbaijan, see Larcher, *La Turquie*, pp. 393-95, 434-36.

[68] Andranik Ozanian (1866-1927) is the most famous and popular of the Armenian freedom fighters. He was later honored by the Russian high command with elevation to the rank of general. His volunteers at Van numbered between 1,000 and 1,500 men.

[69] In Erevan, five regiments of Armenian volunteers were grouped together as the Araratian Legion under the command of Vardan.

[70] The reference is to schoolmaster and chemist Mikayel Minasian, who commandeered charcoal and saltpeter for this work.

an "Armenian cannon." This simple "fire mouth," tested on April 21 against the Haji Bekir barracks, did not cause any damage. On the strategic military level, the weapon had little value, but its psychological impact was enormous, prompting the Armenians to begin at once to manufacture a second cannon.[71]

The Third Period: April 26/May 9-May 5/18

This period began with a serious Armenian defeat. On April 25/May 8, the Turkish troops captured the monastery of Varag, in spite of the spirited resistance offered by a handful of fedayis headed by Shirin Hakobian (Hagopian). The fall of Varag had several consequences. It sealed the possibility of retreat for the Armenians of Van, and it resulted in the dispersion of the refugees gathered in the monastery, some 5,000 of whom succeeded in reaching Aygestan, bringing with them despair and the looming threat of epidemic and starvation. Finally, it created a climate of defeatism among the exhausted and anxious Armenian population. To stop demoralization and imminent famine, Aram and his assistants increased the rounds of inspections and requisitions, while the Military Committee threatened to prosecute and punish those hiding in their homes or in the missionary compounds.[72]

It was the approach of the Armenian volunteers and Russian army that saved the Armenians of Van. On April 29/May 12 the Turkish authorities, who by then had decided to abandon Van, ceased the shelling of Aygestan and began to evacuate the Muslim population by way of the port of Avants. But as Keri's volunteer regiment and other detachments of the Araratian Legion reached Aygestan on May 3/16, Jevdet Bey's bombardment of the Armenians in the City intensified.

The Struggle in the City

Before the Young Turk revolution of 1908, "underground life," to use an expression dear to the Russian Populists, was difficult if not impossible in Van. The presence of the Ottoman civil and military authorities and the City's structure itself, enclosed between the Rock and the walls, worked against any underground activity. It is true that

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[71] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 342.

[72] Ibid., p. 340.

the City had been the cradle of the Armenakan movement, but since the Dashnaktsutiun had established itself in Van, its focus of operations had been in Aygestan. After the 1908 revolution, the ARF nonetheless took advantage of its new legal status and created a subcommittee of seven members in the City.[73] The seven, Haikaz Kosoyan (chairman), Levon Galchayan, Mihran Toromanian, Davit Sargisian, Mirhrtad Mirzakhanian, Harutiun Nerkararian, and Sargis Shahinian, were skilled craftsmen, tradesmen, and teachers with a relatively high educational level.[74] In 1915 they were to become the leaders of an urban defense operation, for which they were untrained but at which they proved themselves to be quite efficient.

On Saturday, April 4/17, news of the death of Ishkhan, then of the arrest of Vramian struck terror among the Armenian population. Shops and workshops closed, and none of the merchants and craftsmen residing in Aygestan ventured to the City. Locum tenens Eznik vardapet appealed to the governor, who bluntly confirmed the fate of Ishkhan and Vramian. To Eznik's appeal the next day for the release of Vramian, Jevdet reportedly replied: "This country will remain either to the Armenians or to the Turks, but it is impossible that the two can coexist."[75]

By that time the ARF subcommittee in the City had also taken the name of Military Committee and had co-opted two additional members, Daniel, the abbot of Aghtamar, and Mirzakhan Mirzakhanian, a Hnchakian lawyer. The market remained closed on Monday, April 6/19, and communications with Aygestan were completely severed. The crackling of rifle fire and the thunder of the cannonade in Aygestan the next morning prompted the Military Committee to act. Against the Turkish military potential of troops, arsenal, and fortress guns, the Armenian forces in the City, consisting of 100 rifles, 210 Mausers, and 60,000 bullets, were negligible.

The Military Committee, seeking to take advantage of the City's layout, created a defensive ring of about 2 kilometers around the Armenian quarter. The district, bounded on the east by the Tabriz Gate and

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[73] The subcommittee was subordinated to the party committee of Aygestan.

[74] Among the seven, two were graduates of the Eramian School of Van, two had studied there, and one was a graduate of the Gevorgian Jemaran of Echmiadzin. See A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 265.

[75] Ibid., p. 273.

Armenian Trench Diggers

Armenian Cartridge Makers

Van Defenders

Van Commanders

on the west by the granary, was overlooked on the north by the fortress whose antiquated guns were trained on the quarter. The fortress itself, elongated by a notched wall on the rocky ridge, sheltered a company of chetés. The defensive ring was subdivided into four sectors: 1) the Tabriz Gate and a part of the still-standing old walls, but in the line of enemy fire; 2) the buildings of the Ottoman Bank, the Excise Office (Régie), and the Medical Office; 3) the border of the khans and markets; 4) the granary. It was near the granary in the western sector that the first encounters occurred and quickly turned very violent. With the Muslims having evacuated the neighboring districts, the battle was fought house to house and especially for control of high buildings or fortifications. Completely encircled, few in number, poorly armed, and inexperienced, the Armenians had to improvise. Some teenagers, carrying gasoline cans, set the municipal administrative buildings on fire, from where the conflagration spread swiftly to the khans, the telegraph office, and the police station. The Turks responded with a cannonade and shower of bullets, but the configuration of the City tempered the effectiveness of the barrage.[76]

While the majority of the Armenians took shelter in their homes, the Military Committee had to resolve the day-to-day problems of supply, armament, and discipline.[77] It was only on April 20/May 3 that Jevdet Bey forwarded to Eznik vardapet a letter threatening to tear apart the Armenian quarters but offering an amnesty if the insurgents would lay down their arms and throw themselves on the mercy of the government. The negotiations, conducted on the Turkish side by Director of the Public Education Sherif Bey and Director of the Ottoman Bank Alcardi, a person close to the Italian consul, produced no results.[78] In this final period, Jevdet Bey, having received artillery reinforcements, unleashed a fierce bombardment of the Armenian quarter. It was a time for Armenian youngsters, *gavroches* from twelve to fourteen years of age, to demonstrate their prowess by acting as messengers, carrying water and ammunition, and recovering enemy weapons. This was also a period of high drama during which the Military Committee refused entry into the defensive ring of "useless

[76] At the beginning of April, the authorities had three fortress guns and four more modern artillery pieces installed around the City.

[77] Margos Der Margosian [Markos Ter-Markosian], *Husher ev khoher* [Memoirs and Meditations] (Fresno, CA: n.p., 1958), pp. 101-14.

[78] *Défense héroïque de Van,* pp. 44-46.

mouths," a large group of Armenian refugee women and children driven there by the Turks to weaken the defenders, while, on the other hand, all Armenian attempts to break the siege by digging a tunnel to a point outside the Tabriz Gate failed.[79]

On May 3/16 the Turks, having already evacuated Aygestan, intensified the shelling in the City.[80] It was a day of death and destruction.[81] But the next day the Armenians of the City and Aygestan were able break out of their encirclement and link up. Amid indescribable enthusiasm, they hoisted an Armenian flag above the citadel. Now masters of Van, the Armenians pillaged the abandoned Muslim quarters and set them ablaze. Dismayed by this episode, A-Do noted: "The Armenian, accustomed to produce riches and wealth, has in this instance destroyed and plundered them. It is the brutality of the Turkish government that led him to this sad behavior."[82]

On May 5/18, the Russian army reached Aygestan and the next day, together with the Armenian volunteers, made a triumphant entry into the City amid the enthusiastic cheers of the population. That same day, May 6/19, the Military Committee addressed its last official statement to the Armenian people, to whom it accorded all the merit and glory for the victory and to whom it offered "this marvelous freedom dreamed about by all the geniuses of our people."[83] For its part, the Russian high command manifested its satisfaction by addressing a congratulatory message to Catholicos Gevorg and on May 7/20 naming Aram Manukian as governor of the Van region. In an appeal to his fellow citizens, Aram called upon them to rally around his government, which was "the fulfillment of twenty-five years of Armenian struggle and hope."[84] The creation of an administration and a militia and police force recruited from among the local Armenian population and author-

[79] A-Do, *Mets depkere*, pp. 336-37.

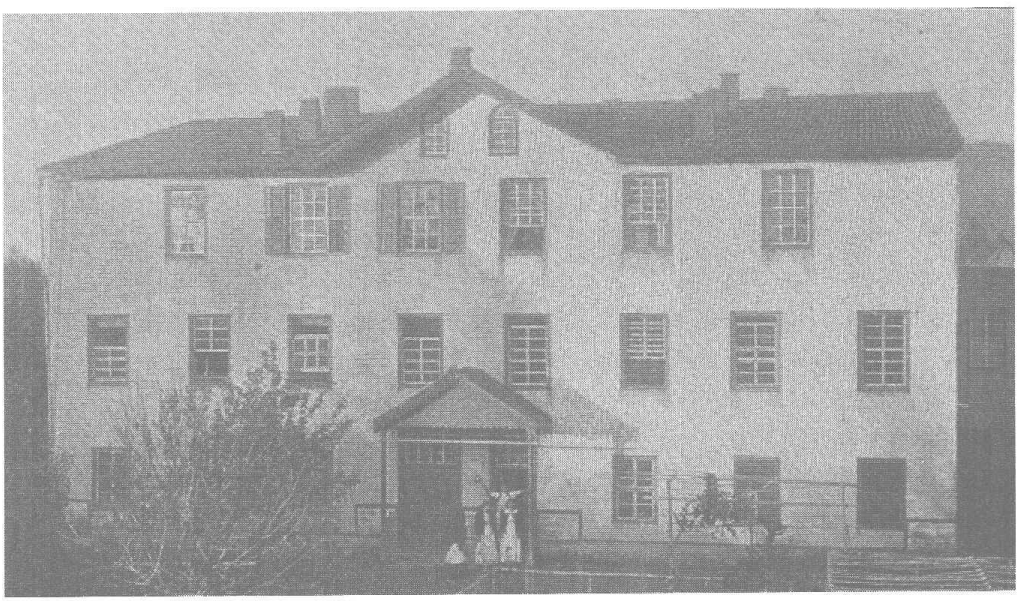
[80] Ibid., p. 357, gives the excerpts of a letter of Jevdet Bey to the Italian consul, explaining his decision to evacuate Van for humanitarian reasons.

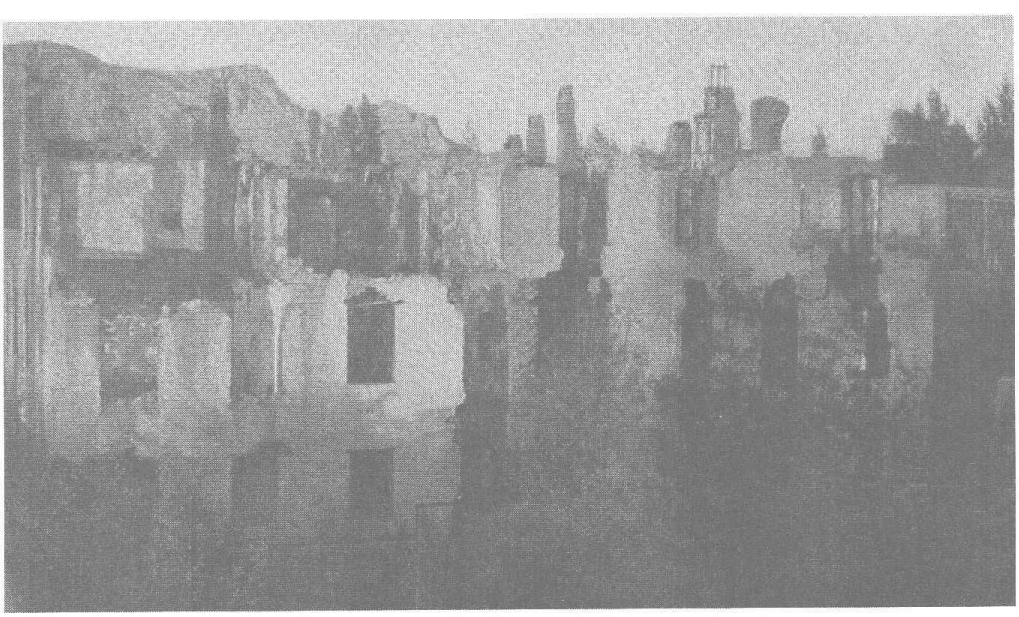
[81] Vardan Parsamyan, *Hay zhoghovrdi patmutyun* [History of the Armenian People], vol. 2 (Erevan: Haypetusmankhrat, 1967), gives the plan of the self-defense of Van, with the positions of the Turkish artillery at the beginning of May. On the whole, the number of Armenian victims during the shelling and fighting was relatively low. According to statistics cited by Hambaryan, "Vani 1915 tvakani herosamarte," p. 44, there were 43 deaths in the City and 250 in Aygestan.

[82] These facts are confirmed by A-Do, Mkhitarian, Der Margosian, and others.

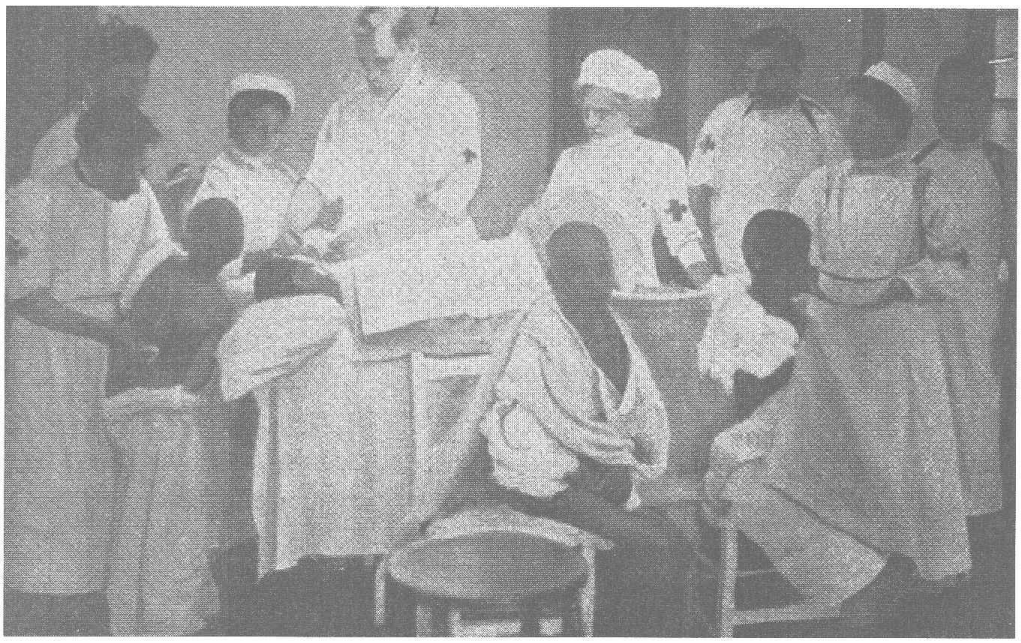
[83] A-Do, *Mets depkere,* p. 363.

[84] *Vaspurakan* (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1930), p. 79 (publication of the Compatriotic Union of Vaspurakan in Tabriz).

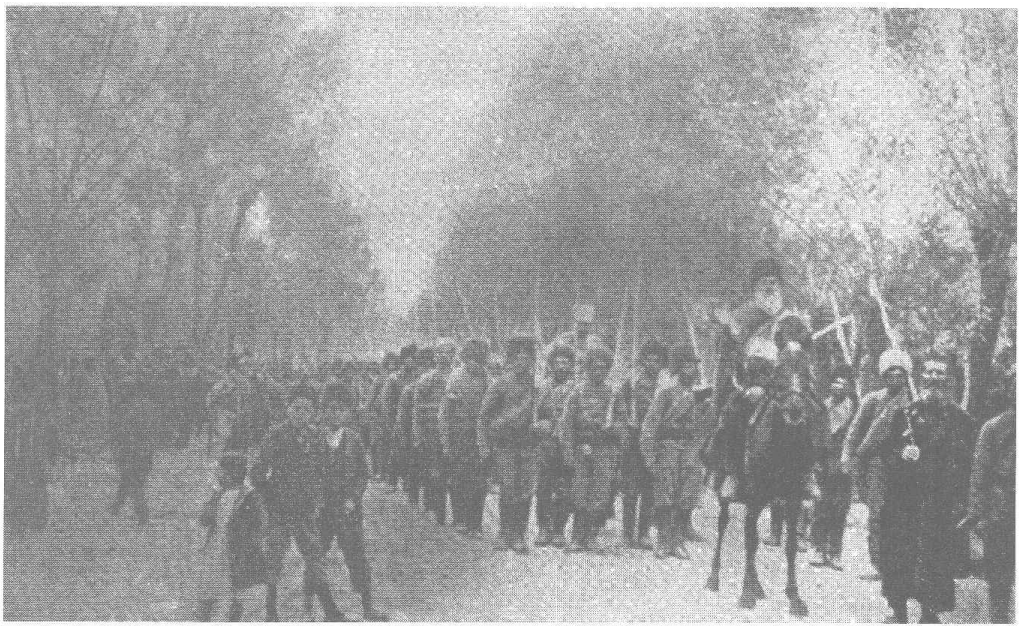




American Hospital before and after Turkish Bombardment



Dr. Clarence and Elizabeth Barrows Ussher, Aygestan



Armenian Volunteers Entering Van, May 1915

ized by the Russian command stimulated the Armenian political consciousness and reinforced the conviction of those who foresaw a liberated and autonomous Armenia under Russian protection.[85]

Hastening to Van from Tiflis and Erevan in less than one month, activists, intellectuals, and journalists became the euphoric witnesses of this first nucleus of "Armenian sovereignty." While the presence of the Russian army was certainly beneficial and even allowed for some "profitable business,"[86] the most pressing question for the administration was how to save the 150,000 Armenians of the neighboring vilayet of Bitlis whose fate depended on a rapid foremarch of the Russian army.

Detailed to clear the area of the last elements of the Turkish army and of Kurdish irregulars, Andranik's men and other volunteer units after very heavy fighting reached the southwest edge of Lake Van in mid-July. They hoped to relieve Bitlis by joining up with the Russian forces that had taken Manazkert. But the Russian army advanced very slowly and then came up against a stiff Turkish counteroffensive from the direction of Bitlis. In a few days the Armenian flights of imagination turned into tragedy. Fearing encirclement, the Russian command not only withdrew its forces from the direction of Bitlis but also decided to evacuate Van. On July 18/31 the Armenians received orders to pack some food and personal belongings, abandon their homes, and set out for the Caucasus. The orders were received with intense amazement and anger, but there was nothing to do but comply. The "Great Retreat" of the Armenians of Vaspurakan involved more than 100,000 panic-stricken people. It was an indescribable flight of riders and people on foot, of men, women, and children, of mules, donkeys, and cows, and of heavily-laden carriages. The armed volunteers tried to guide and shield the caravans but could not avoid the bloody encounters and heavy losses while crossing over the Berkri bridge.[87]

During the exodus, hundreds of children were lost or went astray, and the columns of refugees were plundered by the Kurds. When the Vanetsis arrived at Igdir, exhausted and demoralized, the refugees had traveled more than 200 kilometers. They were met by Caucasian Arme-

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[85] Ibid., pp. 80-83. The composition of that government and the new administrative divisions is given in *Défense héroïque de Van*, pp. 93-99.

[86] Der Margosian, *Husher ev khoher,* p. 116.

[87] On the "Great Retreat," see A-Do, *Mets depkere*, p. 465ff.; Der Margosian, *Husher ev khoher*, p. 118ff.

nian relief committees, which were completely overwhelmed by the enormity of the need. From Igdir, the refugees were directed toward Echmiadzin, where within a few months disease and epidemics would decimate some 30,000 of them.

Conclusion

As a result of the Ottoman and Russian offensives and counteroffensives in the summer of 1915, Van changed hands three times. During one of those interludes, Aram Manukian returned with some assistants but soon had to leave again in what is referred to as the "Little Retreat." The Russians captured the city once more in the autumn of 1915 and would remain in control until the turmoil caused by the collapse of the Romanov dynasty and empire and by the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. During this period Aram was in Erevan, where he would become the "popular dictator" and play a key role in halting the Turkish advance into Russian Armenia near Sardarabad in May of 1918.[88] He is widely regarded as the true "founding father" of the independent Republic of Armenia (1918-1920/21). For those who participated in the creation of this state, the "Heroic Struggle of Van" in 1915 was a decisive milestone.

The movement of the battle front between 1914 and 1918 and the occupation of Turkish Armenia by the Russian army had a far-reaching effect on the destiny of the Armenians, whose fate like that of the Nestorians and Assyro-Chaldeans was linked with a continued Russian military occupation. The interspersed Russian tactical retreats and offensive operations were paralleled by Armenian flight to the Caucasus, followed by return to rebuild abandoned cities and villages. The collapse of the Caucasus front after the Bolshevik revolution of October/November 1917 put an end to this tumultuous and dramatic period in the history of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire.

The last retreat of the Armenians of Van took place in April 1918. As the Turkish army approached the city, approximately 25,000 Armenian civilians, soldiers, and irregulars evacuated toward the Urmia district of northern Persia, where the Nestorian Christians were locked in fierce combat with the Turks (Azeris) and Kurds. This final exodus signaled the end of the two-thousand-five-hundred-year uninterrupted

[88] Serge Afanasyan, *La victoire de Sardarabad* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985).

Armenian presence at Van.[89]

Was the uprising of the Armenians of Van in 1915 a part of a co-ordinated national scheme of the Armenians to rebel in place after place "to hasten the victory of the Entente, to realize their national aspirations, and to accelerate the fall of the [Ottoman] Empire, which they assumed had only a few days of life left," as was charged by the Young Turk government?[90] Was this the proof that the Armenians were preparing a rebellion "on a grand scale" while the Ottoman state was fighting for its very survival?[91] All the evidence indicates that the Armenians, conscious of their dispersion, weakness, and vulnerability, never conceived such a project, but they may occasionally have been guilty of refusing to be massacred without offering resistance. For Henry Morgenthau, the United States Ambassador in Constantinople from 1913 to 1916, the self-defense of Van was only the courageous resolve of Armenians "to defend their own lives and their women's honour against the outrages which they knew were being planned," after the Turks, by massacring thousands of their Armenian compatriots, had made clear the fate that awaited them, too.[92]

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[89] Paolo Cuneo, "Etude sur la topographie et l'iconographie historique de la ville de Van," *Armenian Studies/Etudes Arméniennes: In Memoriam Haïg Berbérian,* ed. Dickran Kouymjian (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1986), p. 126.

[90] *Aspirations et agissements,* p. 222.

[91] Directorate of Ottoman Archives, *Armenians in Ottoman Documents (1915-1920)* (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 1995), p. 7.

[92] Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1919), pp. 304-05.